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ABSTRACT

The social learning approach to marital and family therapy emphasizes the importance of clients' compliance with homework assignments to treatment progress. To investigate the relationship between clients' homework compliance and therapists' and clients' behaviors during therapy sessions and clients' intrasession tension and satisfaction, the marital and family therapy sessions of 24 nuclear families were audiotaped for a 10 week-period. Tapes were analyzed for therapist behaviors (clarification, interpretation, relationship emphasis, education, encouragement of affective expression, control, encouragement of specificity and clarity, and style) and client behaviors (emergency and welfare emotions, task orientation, blame, mutuality, clarity and specificity, and tone of communication). Therapists kept records of homework completion and carried out midweek telephone interviews to assess family tension and satisfaction. An analysis of the results showed that several therapist and client session behaviors correlated with homework completion in the beginning phase of treatment. Homework completion was positively correlated with therapist educational behaviors and negatively correlated with clients' expressions of anger, stress, and blame. Although marital tension negatively correlated with homework completion in the beginning phase, in the middle phase homework completion and marital tension were postively correlated, suggesting that a certain amount of tension is needed to maintain motivation. (BL)

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Homework Compliance in Marital and Family Therapy: A Comprehensive Analysis[1,2]

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Abstract

Although there are a few empirical investigations of the effective components of the social learning approach to marital and family therapy, there are no reported studies of the relationships between therapists' and clients' behaviors and effective treatment. This study examines the relationships between clients' compliance with homework and (1) specific therapists' and clients' session behaviors, and (2) clients' behaviors between sessions. The first ten sessions of 24 distressed families seen in either marital or family therapy were coded for seven therapists' behaviors and seven clients' behaviors. In addition, there was an ongoing assessment of family tension events and family satisfaction during the weeks between each of the sessions. Correlational analyses revealed significant relationships between some of the therapists' and clients' behaviors and homework compliance. The significance of these relationships as well as the potential for future research in this area, are discussed.

Homework Compliance in Marital and Family Therapy:

A Comprehensive Analysis

The social learning approach to marital and family therapy has produced, in its brief history, a volume of research focusing on the effectiveness of its assessment procedures and treatment interventions (Jacobson, 1981; Weiss & Margolin, 1977). A major facet of the assessment and treatment process involves clients' compliance with homework assignments. Clients are asked to track behaviors and/or practice new behaviors at home, and these assignments are considered crucial to treatment progress. Jacobson, Berley, Newport, Elwood, and Phelps (in press) submit that most of the important changes that occur in treatment are mediated by the clients' work on assignments at home.

Despite the plethora of treatment outcome research on the social learning approach to marital and family therapy, little attention has been paid to the therapy process and its relationship with effective treatment. Specifically, there has been a paucity of research focusing on the types of therapists' and clients' behaviors which contribute to making treatment more effective. Only recently have social learning theorists begun to attend to these dimensions in the literature and discuss their importance (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Jacobson, 1981; Vincent, 1980), but still, there has been no systematic study of these variables. The purpose of this study is to empirically investigate therapy process, and more specifically, to examine how clients' homework compliance relates to specific behaviors emitted by therapists and clients.

Clients' noncompliance with homework assignments can pose serious problems, interfering with treatment progress. In spite of the important role client compliance plays in the assessment and treatment process, little is known about it.

According to Weiss (1981), although problems of resistance are one of the most important aspects of relationship therapy, they are the least well described. Because behaviors related to compliance are so complex and not very well understood, Weiss (1981) and Liberman (1981) emphasize that these behaviors need to be analyzed in terms of their antecedents and consequences.

There seem to be many reasons for clients' noncompliance with homework assignments, and a therapist needs to assess the nature of the noncompliant behaviors before intervening. In some cases, the homework may be too difficult for the clients' current skill level, or place too great a demand on the clients' relationship (e.g., ask them to perform emotionally charged tasks with which they cannot cope). In these cases, the therapist may want to start with simpler or shorter assignments, and gradually increase the length and difficulty of the assignments. In other cases, resistance may indicate that the problem behaviors serve a specific function in the marital or family system (e.g., a child's problem behaviors may be masking an unexpressed marital conflict). In these cases, the therapist needs to assess the functional role of the problem behaviors, and perhaps intervene at a more subtle level (e.g., with paradoxical instructions).

On a more behavioral level, certain interactions between the therapist and clients which occur during the treatment session, or else during the week between sessions, may be related to whether or not homework assignments are completed. Although the subject has not been studied empirically, researchers have postulated that the therapist's behaviors affect clients' compliance behaviors (Jacobson et al., in press; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Jacobson et al. (in press) indicate that many therapists find it difficult to foster compliance and that in fact, their behaviors unwittingly may encourage clients' noncompliance. They assert that the therapist's skills involved in fostering homework compliance include the ability to

choose appropriate assignments, the ability to explain these assignments clearly, the ability to gain a commitment from spouses to complete the assignment, and the ability to induce compliance with the assignment.

Understanding the relationships between therapist and client behaviors may be helpful in devising strategies which will foster homework compliance, and in turn, improve treatment effectiveness. This study is an initial attempt to explore these relationships. Specific questions include: (a) How are these behaviors related?, and (b) How do these relationships change across the course of treatment?

Orlinsky and Howard (1978) emphasize the need to measure small segments of the therapy process. In order to do this, they recommend that researchers (a) conduct repeated measures of relatively short-term variations in the patients' lives, (b) do a multivariate session-by-session assessment of the therapeutic process, and (c) do steps (a) and (b) over a relatively long period of time. By exploring the relationships between clients' homework compliance and (a) therapists' and clients' specific behaviors which occur in the therapy session, and (b) clients' reports of tension events and satisfaction during the week between sessions, and doing this across ten weeks of treatment, this study attempts to examine important components of marital and family therapy in a comprehensive manner.

Subjects

The 24 families used in this study were participants in the University Family Studies Project, an NIMH grant jointly administered through the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California (Christensen & Margolin, 1979; Margolin & Christensen, 1981). Families were accepted into the

project if there was evidence of both marital and child problems, and if both parents were living in the home with at least one target child between the ages of 3 and 13. Screening criteria consisted of two marital measures, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and the Areas of Change Questionnaire (Weiss & Birchler, 1975), two child measures, the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1978; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1979), and the Becker Bi-Polar Adjective Checklist (Becker, 1960), and the concensus of two clinicians regarding the degree of distress in both the marital and parent-child relationships. In order to participate, families needed to qualify as distressed on at least three of the five criteria.

Procedure

Families were recruited from the greater Los Angeles area and seen in treatment at either the University of California, Los Angeles or the University of Southern California. All families received both marital and family therapy, and were randomly assigned to either a marital-then-family therapy sequence or family-then-marital therapy sequence. The marital and family treatment modules each lasted up to 12 weeks. Data for this study came from the first half of therapy only. Half of the families participated in the marital therapy module and the other half participated in the family treatment module. In-session data came from audiotapes of each family's initial ten sessions, and were coded for (a) seven types of therapist behaviors-Clarification, Interpretation, and Observation, Relationship Emphasis, Education, Encouragement of Affective Expression, Control, Encouragement of Specificity and Clarity, and Style, and (b) seven types of client behaviors-Emergency Emotions, Welfare Emotions, Task Orientation, Blame, Mutuality, Clarity and Specificity, and Tone of Communication. Observations were made on three segments (each four minutes in length) from each of the therapy

sessions. Each behavior was rated on a five-point scale in terms of the degree to which it occurred during a four minute segment. Reliability coefficients on the measures ranged from .36 to .94, with 10 of the 14 measures having reliability coefficients above .70.

Data on homework completion was gathered from the therapists' session reports. Therapists rated this dimension on a four-point scale: 0 for no homework assigned, 1 for homework not completed, 2 for homework partially completed, and 3 for homework completed. Homework assignments for couples and families ranged from asking them to assess home behaviors (e.g., Spouse Observation Checklist, tracking of desired and/or problem behaviors, keeping diaries focusing on specific behaviors and cognitions), to tape recording communication exercises, to increasing positive interactions (e.g., going on a special outing, exchanging notes of appreciation), to following through on behavioral contracts.

In addition, there was ongoing assessment of family tension events and family satisfaction during the week between each session through telephone interviews which occurred two to three times per week. During the interview, one of the parents was asked to report the number of marital and parent-child tension events which had occurred that day, along with the day's ratings of marital and parent-child satisfaction.

Results

Pearson product-moment correlational analyses were performed examining the relationship between homework completion and (a) each of the fourteen coded session behaviors, and (b) the between-session reported marital and parent/child tension events and marital and parent/child satisfaction ratings.

The ten treatment sessions were collapsed across three treatment phases, with the Beginning Phase consisting of sessions one through three, the Middle Phase consisting of sessions four through seven, and the End Phase consisting of sessions eight through ten. Correlational analyses were performed on data from each treatment phase, resulting in three correlational matrices. Of the 14 coded session behaviors, only two clients' behaviors, Blame and Task Orientation, showed significant differences between the marital and family treatment modules, and therefore, these two measures were analyzed with the treatment effects having been partialed out.

Table 1 contains the correlation matrix of Homework Completion and coded session behaviors across the three phases of treatment. During the Beginning Phase, Homework Completion was positively associated with two session behaviors, Education by therapists, $r = .35$, $p < .046$, and Clarity and Specificity by clients, $r = .36$, $p < .044$, and negatively associated with three session behaviors, therapists' Clarification, Interpretation, and Observation, $r = -.48$, $p < .009$, and clients' Emergency Emotions, $r = -.48$, $p < .009$, and Blame, $r = -.36$, $p < .045$. During the Middle Phase, Homework Completion was positively associated with therapists' Style, $r = .45$, $p < .014$, while during the End Phase, Homework Completion was not significantly correlated with any coded session behaviors.

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of Homework Completion and Coded Session Behaviors in the Three Phases of Treatment

Coded Session Behaviors	Homework Completion		
	Beginning Phase	Middle Phase	End Phase
Therapist Behaviors			
Clarification, Interpretation, and Observation	-.48*** (24)	-.04 (24)	.34 (17)
Relationship Emphasis	.02 (24)	.05 (24)	-.31 (17)
Control	.11 (24)	-.32 (24)	-.08 (17)
Encouragement of Affective Expression	-.09 (24)	.05 (24)	.07 (17)
Education	.35* (24)	.30 (24)	.37 (17)
Encouragement of Specificity and Clarity	.00 (24)	.27 (24)	.12 (17)
Style	-.02 (24)	.45** (24)	-.22 (17)

Table 1 (Continued)

Coded Session Behaviors	Homework Completion		
	Beginning Phase	Middle Phase	End Phase
Client Behaviors			
Emergency Emotions	-.43** (24)	-.06 (24)	-.12 (24)
Welfare Emotions	.23 (24)	-.12 (24)	.01 (17)
Tone	.23 (24)	.13 (24)	.20 (17)
Clarity and Specificity	.36* (24)	-.02 (24)	-.31 (17)
Mutuality	.08 (24)	-.02 (24)	-.22 (17)
Blame	-.36* (21)	.13 (14)	-.01 (9)
Task Orientation	.24 (21)	.04 (21)	-.04 (14)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate number of cases.

* $\underline{P} < .05$
** $\underline{P} < .025$
*** $\underline{P} < .01$

Table 2 depicts the correlations between Homework Completion and between-session behaviors across the three treatment phases. During the Beginning Phase, Homework Completion was negatively associated with Marital Tension Events, $r = -.58$, $p < .002$, while during the Middle Phase, Homework Completion was positively associated with Marital Tension Events, $r = .42$, $p < .029$. During the End Phase, Homework Completion was not significantly correlated with any between-session behaviors.

It should be noted that not all of the 24 families completed eight sessions of therapy (the minimum required to be included in the End Phase), thereby reducing the sample size, and requiring stronger correlational coefficients for statistical significance. Therefore, coeffecients which would have been significant in the two earlier phases, were not significant during the End Phase.

Conclusion

By examining how clients' homework compliance relates to therapists' and clients' behaviors, this study attempted to explore in a comprehensive manner important components of marital and family therapy. It is noted that the correlational analyses used in this study leave the researcher with several questions about the results. Causality cannot be inferred, and fluctuations in the sample size greatly affect significance levels. Given these questions, caution must be used in interpreting these results.

Jacobson et al. (in press) suggest that most of the important changes which occur in treatment are mediated by the clients doing their homework assignments. Yet Weiss (1981) asserts that client compliance is one of the least understood aspects of treatment. In this study, a number of therapist and client session behaviors were correlated with Homework Completion in the Beginning phase of

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Homework Completion and Between-Session Behaviors in the Three Phases of Treatment

Between-Session Behaviors	Homework Completion		
	Beginning Phase	Middle Phase	End Phase
Marital Tension	-.58*** (24)	.42* (21)	.12 (13)
Parent/Child Tension	-.05 (24)	-.09 (23)	.02 (16)
Marital Satisfaction	.20 (24)	.29 (23)	.21 (17)
Parent/Child Satisfaction	-.01 (24)	.11 (21)	-.04 (16)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate number of cases.

* $P < .05$
* $P < .025$
*** $P < .01$

treatment. However, there was only one significant correlation during the Middle phase, and no significant correlations during the End phase. During the Beginning phase, Homework Completion was positively associated with therapist educational behaviors and negatively associated with clients' expression of anger, stress, and blame.

These findings may be supportive of Gurman and Kniskern's (1978) observation that client deterioration in marital and family therapy is related to focusing on clients' problems early in treatment. That is, client noncompliance, which is related to clients' stress in the early sessions, may be one factor that is associated with deterioration in treatment. In view of these findings and the Gurman and Kniskern hypothesis, the relationship between noncompliance and treatment outcome deserves future attention.

Educational behaviors by therapists, although not significantly correlated with Homework Completion during the Middle and End phases, continued to show a positive relationship with homework compliance beyond the Beginning Phase. These results tenatively suggest that if the therapist expects clients to be compliant with their homework assignments, s/he must emphasize the importance of these assignments and make certain that the clients understand the assignments by modeling and coaching within the session. Or, as Jacobson et al. (in press) suggest, the therapists must actively seek to foster compliance. Further research is needed into what types of specific educational behaviors by therapists actually are related to homework compliance.

Another interesting finding related to Homework Completion was found regarding the clients' reporting of marital tension events. During the Beginning phase of treatment, Homework Completion, as might be expected, was negatively correlated with marital tension events, but during the Middle phase, these two

behaviors were positively associated, meaning that homework was more likely to be completed if the couple was reporting tension at home. These data reveal that in the early phases of treatment, a lack of marital tension was associated with client compliance, while in the later phases of therapy the presence of marital tension was associated with compliance. This pattern suggests that it may be important to keep a certain degree of tension alive in the relationship in order to keep the clients motivated.

Finally, the methodology used in this study appears to be a useful approach to comprehensively studying the relationship between session behaviors and important components of marital and family therapy. Jacobson et al. (in press) have described a number of therapists' behaviors which they believe are associated with homework compliance and which were not addressed here. It would be of interest to examine those specific behaviors and their associations with homework compliance using this methodology. It is recommended for future studies however, that perceptual measures be included (e.g., self-report measures, thought diaries) looking at how the therapists and the clients perceive what is occurring both within and outside the therapy sessions.

Marital and family therapy are complex processes, involving multiple behaviors and perceptions, which change in varied ways across the course of treatment. The only way to begin to understand the complexity of these treatment processes is to study them in a comprehensive manner. The results of this study suggest that this is possible.

Footnotes

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